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ABSTRACT

Guilford County School District is the third largest school district in North Carolina. It includes urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods and a full range of income levels with a population that is approximately 60% white and 40% minority, predominantly African American. When three previous school districts merged to form Guilford County Schools, the Middle School Program was initiated. This program called for evaluation annually. In 1995-96, evaluation efforts consisted of the administration of a survey to all students, teachers, and parents. The survey was repeated in the second year to establish a firm baseline, and the design of a new evaluation plan began in the second year. In 1997-98 schools were to provide input to the formative evaluation program, and in 1998-99 the formative evaluation plans were to be carried out. Then in the 1999-2000 school year, the administration of the survey to parents, students, and teachers is to be repeated. In 1995-96, 857 middle school teachers, 6,938 parents, and 11,281 students from the district's 17 middle schools responded to the survey, which focused on strengths and weaknesses of the school and suggestions for improvement. In 1997 responses were received from 878 teachers, 6,429 parents, and 11,774 students. Overall results were positive, with few changes noted in the responses between the 2 years. In each year, schools received their survey item data in tabular and graphic form to use in their School Improvement Plans. Anecdotal reports by principals suggested that these reports were very helpful. Two appendixes contain sample reports from both years. (Contains one reference.) (SLD)

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A Systems Approach to Middle School Evaluation: Guilford County Schools' Formative Approach

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Background on Guilford County Schools and the Middle School Program

Guilford County Schools covers approximately 600 square miles in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. With a current student enrollment of approximately 60,000 and 8,000 employees, the system ranks as about the 60th largest nationally, and third largest in North Carolina. The current county-wide system replaced three former school districts – two city (Greensboro & High Point) and one county (Guilford) – which were fully merged as of the 1993-94 school year. Guilford County includes urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods and a full range of income levels. The student population is approximately 60 percent white and 40 percent minority, predominantly African American. There are increasing proportions of Asian students and students with limited English proficiency.

At the time of merger, the Guilford County Schools Board of Education committed to unified programs in a number of areas, one of which was the Middle School Program. The Middle School Concept had been implemented in each of the former districts, but with varying degrees of success. A process over the course of several years ensued. Fundamental to the process was the creation of a Middle School Task Force composed of educators and community members, which was extensively involved in the development of the Middle School Program.

The plan for Guilford County Schools was congruent with the central components of the middle school concept (George and Alexander, 1993). The seven central elements are:

- focus on academic achievement in the core curriculum,
- daily teacher advisory,
- team organization in every grade,
- flexible block scheduling,
- an expanded menu of electives and student activities, and
- differentiated instruction, and heterogeneous grouping in science and social studies in all schools.

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The Board of Education of the newly merged system formally adopted the Middle School Program and called for an annual evaluation. The program was put into place in 1995-96, and the Guilford County Schools Office of Assessment and Evaluation undertook the evaluation, in cooperation with the Office of Secondary Achievement.

Methods

Evaluation Process and Timeline

The mandate by the Board of Education for an annual evaluation required fast planning and implementation for the first year. It was determined that a survey of students, teachers, and parents would occur as a first step. After the first survey results were made available, the need to repeat the survey for a second year in order to establish a firm baseline was expressed. At the same time, there was a desire to broaden the scope of the evaluation to include data collection instruments in addition to the survey, and to involve the schools in the formative evaluation of their own efforts. For these reasons the following timeline for the evaluation evolved:

1995-96	Administration of the Guilford County Schools Middle Schools survey to all students, teachers, and parents
1996-97	Administration of the Guilford County Schools Middle Schools survey to all students, teachers, and parents
	Begin design of new evaluation plan
1997-98	Schools determine needs and provide input to the school's formative evaluation plan for 1997-98 and 1998-99
1998-99	Schools' formative evaluation plans are carried out
1999-00	Administration of the Guilford County Schools Middle Schools survey to all students, teachers, and parents

Survey Development

Increased academic achievement was already a major focus of the Superintendent and the Board of Education, so academic achievement per se was not included in the survey or later evaluation plan. Survey questions focused on:

- The Middle School Concept;
- Instruction and Learning, e.g. expectations, effort;
- School Climate;
- Parent Involvement;
- "Grading" the School.

A matrix was developed with the key content of the survey comprising one axis and the three target audiences on the other. Items were developed for each audience, if they were viewed as "competent" to respond. For example, all respondents were asked questions relating to parent involvement, while parents and students were not asked questions about aspects of the Middle School Concept such as Team Planning.

Drafts of the survey were reviewed by Central Office staff including curriculum specialists, the Superintendent's Cabinet, the Board of Education, student teachers, parents, and several students. Appropriate changes were made.

Open-Ended Survey Items
In addition to the multiple-choice items, in 1996 three open-ended questions were asked:

1. In your opinion, what were the strengths of this school?
2. In you opinion, what are the biggest problems facing this school?
3. What are your suggestions for solving some of these problems or what other improvements would you suggest for this school?

Question 3 was eliminated in 1997, since it produced responses that reiterated responses to the first two questions.

Survey Administration
During 1996-97 the survey was conducted in the 17 GCS Middle Schools during April and May. The survey was repeated in a very similar manner in April 1997. The three survey forms (one for each of the three target groups) were distributed through the schools. All individuals in these groups had the opportunity to respond to the survey.

School identification codes were pre-coded onto the machine-readable survey forms. The three sets of survey forms were shipped to the schools, with overall instructions to the principal for the distribution of materials.

Principals were instructed to administer the survey to teachers as a group (for example during a staff meeting) prior to distributing student and parent forms to teachers. Principals were provided with precise instructions about informing teachers about the survey, and for conducting the survey. Surveys were collected immediately and sealed in an envelope for return to the Office of Assessment and Evaluation.

Teachers were provided with precise instructions about informing students about the survey, and for conducting the survey. Surveys were collected immediately and sealed in an envelope for return to the Office of Assessment and Evaluation.

The parent survey packets included the survey, instructions, and an envelope which was to be sealed prior to returning the survey to the school. Schools had the capacity to produce mailing labels electronically for each student in the school. School staff affixed the labels onto the packets which had been prepared for each group of students. Teachers sent the packets home with the students, and kept a roster of those students who returned the surveys. Principals were encouraged to find creative ways to encourage students to return the surveys. At the end of a three week period, all survey materials were returned to Assessment and Evaluation for scanning.

Results

Response Rates

In 1996 Survey responses were received from 857 middle school teachers, 6,938 parents, and 11,281 students. This translates into approximately the following response rates:

- 100 percent of students
- 100 percent of teachers
- 62 percent of parents

In 1997, survey responses were received from 878 middle school teachers, 6,429 parents, and 11,774 students. This translates into approximately the following response rates:

- 100 percent of students
- 100 percent of teachers
- 55 percent of parents

In essence, the student and parent groups were "captive audiences". The response rate for parents was calculated using the number of responses received divided by the April Average Daily Attendance. Exact number of

households is somewhat smaller than the number of students, since some households have more than one child in middle school.

No attempt was made to adjust the parent sample for representativeness. While 34.1 percent of students reported their ethnic group as Black/African American, 28.0 percent of parents did so. Additionally, 72.8 percent of the parent respondents were female.

Analysis and Reporting to Schools
Responses to each item were weighted from +2 to -2, with neutral responses receiving a score of 0. With this weighting system, averages of 0 represented neutrality, positive numbers represented positive responses, and negative number represented negative responses. The standard deviations were also reported and interpreted as an index of agreement.

Tabular and graphic results were summarized for the school system as a whole, and for each school. (Appendix 1 provides samples.) The second year, comparative data from 1996 was included (see Appendix 2.)

Overall Results
Overall the results were very positive, although areas needing improvement were noted. System-wide, there were few changes in the responses between 1996 and 1997. A comparison of 1996 and 1997 results revealed improved ratings in a number of areas such as teacher advisory, school-within-a-school, and school safety. There was a great deal of variation among schools, both in terms of the nature of the responses, and in changes from 1996 to 1997.

The responses can be grouped into five broad categories, shown below. (The questions shown are illustrative rather than complete.) The percentages shown are from 1997.

1. The Middle School Concept (includes Advisor/Advisee classes, flexible block scheduling, a thematic interdisciplinary curriculum and interdisciplinary teams, electives, clubs, and athletic activities)

- Overwhelming, teachers agreed that the administrative team is effective in defining the middle school concept (90%), and that their school staff is effective in its implementation (91%).

- With respect to interdisciplinary teams, teachers agreed that their team worked effectively together (76%), and reported that teams have goals and objectives for the year (78%), and plan for interdisciplinary instruction (66%). Teachers agreed that teams helped to improve students' sense of

belonging (91%). Seventy five percent of students reported that they were on a "good team".

- Most teachers (67%) believed that flexible block scheduling is an important component of the Middle School Program, that it improves student achievement (71%), student attitude about school (66%), and the teacher's attitude toward teaching (70%).

- While 92% of the teachers agreed that elective/encore courses are an important component of the middle school plan, only 54% reported that elective teachers are a part of the team, and 63% reported that core and elective teachers work together to address student needs. The majority of teachers and parents were satisfied with the number and variety of elective classes offered (over 77% in each case), while students were less satisfied (between 60% and 70%).

- Teachers (72%) generally agreed about the importance of the Advisor/Advisee program, and 51% followed a curriculum. The majority of students reported positive feelings about the program, but 44% reported doing homework during A/A class.

2. *Instruction and Learning* (includes expectations, effort, diversity and equity, student success, and the use of technology and media)

- Teachers were confident that they were meeting the academic needs of their students (89%), and that they were employing instructional strategies that accommodate the diverse learning styles of students (95%). Teachers reported that they provided a variety of teaching strategies and learning activities in their classes (96% and 94%, respectively). Teachers expected all of their students to be successful (98%). Parents agreed that their children were given challenging work in both core and elective classes (about 80 in core classes, and 78% in electives).

- Over 77% of teachers agreed that heterogeneous grouping is an important component of middle schools and that this practice improves students' attitude toward school. However, there is a clear need to provide continued training in how to differentiate instruction in heterogeneous classes. For example, 63% of teachers reported a belief that students of all abilities succeed in heterogenously grouped classes. Of parents, 63% stated that teachers were able to meet the needs of children in heterogeneous classes.

- Students perceive a high level of "academic press" from their teachers. They found their mathematics classes (78%), and other core classes such

as science and social studies to be challenging (around 70%). A majority agreed that they were learning the things they will need in the future (73%).

- Parents reported that their children were enthusiastic about learning at the school (76%), and were getting the skills they need (80%).

- Teachers reported that the Media Center accommodated the needs of teachers (91%) and students (90%). Students enjoyed using the Media Center (76%) and felt welcome there (73%).

3. School Climate (includes behavior, discipline, school safety and cleanliness, respect and caring, and support programs)

- Teachers (89%) and students (61%) felt safe in their school. The majority of parents reported that their children felt safe (80%). Students reported that students at the school fight a lot (55%), and do not follow school rules (54%). Many teachers (61%) and fewer parents (30%) reported that student misbehavior was a problem at the school. Only about 50% of teachers reported that in-school-suspension and school-within-a-school improved student discipline. With respect to the school being clean and comfortable, 64% of teachers, 82% of parents, and 54% of students agreed. The majority of students reported that teachers treated them with respect (70%), while 76% of teachers reported that most students respected teachers. While 67% of students said they enjoy learning at school, 60% reported that school is just a boring routine. Most parents (80%) reported that their child enjoyed school, and 77% reported that their child was eager and enthusiastic about learning at school.

4. Parent Involvement

- Teachers reported that they encouraged parents to participate in school activities (94%), regularly scheduled conferences (82%), and that parents were eager to talk about their children's academic progress (79%). Parents also reported that they were encouraged to participate in school activities (84%). Parents felt free to contact teachers (91%), and reported that teachers listened to their concerns (81%).

5. Grade the School

- Seventy-nine percent of teachers agreed that their school deserved a grade of "A" or "B". Ninety-five percent of teachers agreed that their school deserved a grade of "C" or better.

- Sixty-six percent of parents agreed that their school deserved a grade of "A" or "B". Ninety-one percent of parents agreed that their school deserved a grade of "C" or better.

- Fifty-one percent of students agreed that their school deserved a grade of "A" or "B". Eighty-one percent of students agreed that their school deserved a grade of "C" or better.

Open-Ended Results
Analysis of the open-ended responses was contracted to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro both years of the survey. Samples large enough to represent the school and selected demographic characteristics were selected for transcription and categorization. Responses were summarized and provided to each school. Generally, the responses to the open-ended questions supported and validated the multiple-choice results. Summary reports were sent to each school.

Use of Survey Results for School Planning
Each year schools received their multiple-choice survey item data in both tabular and graphic form, which schools teams have used extensively in developing their School Improvement Plans, required as part of the State accountability program. Principals met several times each year with the Director of Secondary Achievement, then in turn met with their school teams, in order to use survey results for planning.

Phase 2 of the Evaluation: A Site-Based, Formative Evaluation Cycle
Now that there are two years of baseline survey data, plans are to administer the survey once every three years. Planning is underway to use the intervening years to work on improvement in the psychometric qualities of the survey instruments, and toward the use of formative, qualitative evaluation techniques, as described in the timeline, above.

Formative, School-Based Evaluation Planning
Schools were notified in February, 1998 that the following systemwide issues had emerged from the surveys:

- differentiated instruction
- advisor/advisee programs
- block/flexible programs
- team organization and interdisciplinary teaming
- collaboration between core and encore (elective) teachers
- intramural programs
- school safety
- discipline

- parent involvement.

School were asked to prioritize these issues in terms of concern from their school staff's perspective. With monitoring and oversight provided by Guilford County Schools Assessment and Evaluation, teams from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro will work with each school on designing and carrying out the formative evaluation plan in 1997-98 and 1998-99.

Improvement the Psychometric Characteristics of the Survey
Since the Middle School Survey will not be administered again until 1999-00, the intervening time can be spent on improving the survey. To this end, the Office of Assessment and Evaluation will conduct item analysis and factor analysis in order to pursue the possibility of reducing the number of items and/or eliminating items. Focus groups comprised of representatives from the student, teacher and parent groups will work with staff to improve the wording and clarity of the items.

Discussion

The importance of this evaluation of the Middle School Program has become increasingly clear. First, a clear message regarding the importance of the Middle School Program was sent to the schools by the Board of Education by their mandate that the program be evaluated. The nature of the survey was such that both the implementation and the outcomes of the Middle School Program were monitored.

Second, anecdotal reports by numerous principals suggest that both the information provided by the survey results, and the planning meetings with Central Office staff to discuss the meaning and use of the results, were extremely helpful. All of our schools have by state law submitted formal School Improvement Plans as one part of the accountability program for the last several years. Middle school principals have consistently indicated that the planning process involving the Middle School Survey helped a great deal in formulating the School Improvement Plans.

The formative evaluation process just beginning has been positively viewed by principals as a way to engage the school leadership team and others in continuous improvement. In the midst of a very high stakes accountability program and the stresses inherent to that process, site-based involvement in the planning and evaluation process is both positive and proactive.

Reference

George, P. & Alexander, W. (1993). *The Exemplary Middle School. (2nd Edition).* New York: Holt, Rinehart.

Appendices

Appendix 1	Sample Reports from 1996-97
Appendix 2	Sample Reports from 1997-98

Guilford County Schools -- Middle School TEACHER Survey (Spring, 1997)

Guilford County

(Note: All calculations made for **reversed** items were based on following weights: Strongly Agree = -2, Agree = -1, No Opinion/Does Not Apply = 0, Disagree = + 1, Strongly Disagree = + 2)

Item #	Item Text	# Responding	Missing	Strongly Agree (+2) A	Agree (+1) B	No Opinion/DNA (0) C	Disagree (-1) D	Strongly Disagree (-2) E	GCS Average 1997	GCS Average 1996	1996-1997 Difference	System StDev 1997
1	Our administrative team is effective in defining the middle school concept for our school.	875	3	48.6%	41.3%	3.4%	6.1%	0.7%	**1.31**	1.08	**0.23**	0.85
2	Our staff is effective in implementing the middle school program.	877	1	47.8%	43.7%	3.6%	4.7%	0.2%	**1.34**	1.15	**0.20**	0.78
3	Our administrative team is effective in establishing a climate where all students have the opportunity to succeed.	873	5	43.9%	42.2%	4.0%	8.5%	1.5%	**1.18**	0.96	**0.23**	0.96
4	Our staff is effective in establishing a climate where all students have the opportunity to succeed.	877	1	46.8%	43.8%	2.4%	6.3%	0.8%	**1.29**	1.09	**0.20**	0.85
5	I am proud to say that I work at this school.	876	2	59.0%	30.5%	5.3%	4.5%	0.8%	**1.42**	1.22	**0.20**	0.84
6	Our administrative team really cares about our students.	875	3	54.6%	38.5%	3.4%	2.7%	0.7%	**1.44**	1.29	**0.14**	0.75
7	Our school building is usually clean and comfortable.	876	2	28.4%	35.7%	4.5%	22.1%	9.2%	**0.52**	0.29	**0.23**	1.35
8	I enjoy working at this school.	876	2	50.2%	37.7%	4.7%	6.7%	0.7%	**1.30**	1.12	**0.18**	0.89
9	Most students respect the teachers in this school.	874	4	24.4%	51.5%	3.3%	17.4%	3.4%	**0.76**	0.53	**0.23**	1.11
10	Most teachers respect the students in this school.	876	2	42.2%	52.2%	2.1%	3.3%	0.2%	**1.33**	1.17	**0.16**	0.70
11	Flexible (block) scheduling is an important component of our middle school's program.	872	6	35.1%	31.7%	20.4%	9.1%	3.8%	**0.85**	0.76	**0.09**	1.11
12	Flexible scheduling improves student achievement.	871	7	34.7%	36.3%	23.7%	4.6%	0.8%	**0.99**	0.86	**0.13**	0.92
13	Flexible scheduling improves student attitudes toward school.	871	7	30.9%	34.7%	28.4%	5.3%	0.8%	**0.90**	0.69	**0.21**	0.93
14	Flexible scheduling improves my attitude toward teaching.	873	5	34.8%	34.9%	23.8%	4.9%	1.5%	**0.97**	0.78	**0.19**	0.96
15	Heterogeneous grouping improves student attitudes toward school.	874	4	23.5%	41.0%	13.7%	17.5%	4.3%	**0.62**	0.44	**0.18**	1.15
16	Heterogeneous grouping is an important component of our middle school plan.	873	5	28.4%	48.9%	12.1%	8.7%	1.8%	**0.93**	0.74	**0.20**	0.96
17	Students of all abilities can succeed in heterogeneously grouped classes. **(Revised)**	874	4	21.7%	41.4%	7.6%	22.8%	6.5%	**0.49**	N/A	**N/A**	1.24
18	I feel safe at this school.	875	3	45.3%	44.1%	2.1%	7.3%	1.3%	**1.25**	1.06	**0.19**	0.90
19	School teams improve the student's sense of belonging.	875	3	49.1%	41.9%	5.4%	2.9%	0.7%	**1.36**	1.16	**0.20**	0.77
20	Our team has an effective team leader.	873	5	45.6%	27.7%	19.6%	5.4%	1.7%	**1.10**	0.96	**0.14**	1.01

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ALLEN JAY Middle School STUDENT Survey
(Spring, 1996)

Allen Jay	(Note: All calculations made for **reversed** items were based on following weights: Strongly Agree = -2, Agree = -1, No Opinion/Do Not Know = 0, Disagree = +1, Strongly Disagree = +2)	# Responding	Missing	Strongly Agree (+2)	Agree (+1)	No Opinion/DNA (0)	Disagree (-1)	Strongly Disagree (-2)	School Mean	School Standard Deviation	Guilford County Mean	Difference (+/-)	Significant Difference (+/-)
Item #	Item Text			A	B	C	D	E					
5	I like school this year.	479	3	16.7%	48.9%	10.6%	15.7%	8.1%	0.50	1.18	0.58	-0.08	
6	Most school days are just a boring routine. (**reversed**)	476	6	30.0%	27.3%	10.7%	26.7%	5.3%	-0.50	1.31	-0.51	0.01	
7	I enjoy coming to school.	478	4	15.3%	41.2%	12.3%	18.6%	12.6%	0.28	1.28	0.22	0.06	
8	When all is said and done, I feel that I am important in this school.	480	2	16.0%	32.9%	25.0%	16.9%	9.2%	0.30	1.19	0.27	0.03	
9	Teachers treat me with respect.	478	4	27.2%	41.2%	12.6%	11.7%	7.3%	0.69	1.20	0.67	0.02	
10	I enjoy learning at my school.	479	3	21.7%	42.8%	16.5%	13.4%	5.6%	0.62	1.13	0.63	-0.02	
11	I am satisfied with what I learn at my school.	480	2	26.3%	45.2%	11.5%	12.9%	4.2%	0.76	1.10	0.75	0.01	
12	I try hard to succeed in my classes.	480	2	49.6%	41.3%	4.8%	3.1%	1.3%	1.35	0.81	1.36	-0.02	
13	I am proud of my school.	479	3	18.4%	33.4%	22.3%	14.6%	11.3%	0.33	1.25	0.52	-0.19	
14	I feel safe at my school.	477	5	17.2%	32.7%	20.1%	16.1%	13.8%	0.23	1.30	0.44	-0.21	
15	Students at my school fight a lot. (**reversed**)	479	3	29.2%	32.4%	14.8%	19.6%	4.0%	-0.63	1.20	-0.45	-0.18	
16	Students in this school follow the school rules.	477	5	2.9%	16.8%	13.6%	37.5%	29.1%	-0.73	1.14	-0.58	-0.15	
17	The school building is usually clean and comfortable.	480	2	10.4%	35.8%	15.6%	23.5%	14.6%	0.04	1.26	0.25	-0.21	
18	I worry about physical violence at my school. (**reversed**)	479	3	17.1%	23.6%	19.4%	28.6%	11.3%	-0.07	1.29	0.17	-0.24	
19	Teachers keep my attention in class.	480	2	15.4%	39.6%	16.0%	18.1%	10.8%	0.31	1.24	0.23	0.08	
20	I find it easy to do well in my classes.	478	4	17.4%	37.7%	13.6%	21.8%	9.6%	0.31	1.26	0.37	-0.06	

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